



HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE DUNCAN HUNTER – CHAIRMAN

PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release:
November 15, 2006

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House Armed Services Committee Holds Hearing to Assess Ongoing Military Operations in Iraq

Washington, D.C. – The House Armed Services Committee today continued its oversight of ongoing military operations and stability efforts in Iraq. At today’s hearing, members of the committee received testimony from Department of Defense (DOD) and the Department of State (DOS) on the successes and current challenges in Iraq.

“No one can doubt this committee’s pride in, and gratitude to, the dedicated U.S. military personnel, who have participated in Operation Iraqi Freedom since 2003 and who are now serving in Iraq—currently numbering roughly 147,000,” said Hunter. “Many of these brave men and women have even voluntarily returned to Iraq with their units.”

Chairman Hunter reiterated his belief that setting a specific deadline for troop withdrawal would send the wrong signal. “I remain convinced that a calendar-based withdrawal from Iraq—one that has no regard for security conditions or the fledgling Iraqi capabilities on the ground—would empower and even embolden the extremists.” He added that we are still in the tough phase of standing up the military and police forces that can protect the new government.

Chairman Hunter concluded the hearing by calling attention to the importance of rotating all Iraqi infantry battalions into areas where they can experience combat. He stated that exposure to battle is key to improving the capabilities of the Iraqi Army.

General John Abizaid, Commander of U.S. Central Command, testified on the military progress being made in Iraq. Citing the 1.5 million Americans who have served in the region since September 11, 2001, Gen. Abizaid commended their service of confronting terrorists, protecting global commerce, stabilizing newly elected governments in Iraq and Afghanistan, and helping to stabilize the security of the region. However, Gen. Abizaid also highlighted the increased number of trained Iraqi Security Forces who are now taking over responsibility for security—and who have three times the casualty rates of coalition forces. “In the north [of Iraq], significant progress is being made in transitioning security responsibilities to capable Iraqi forces.”

Ambassador David Satterfield, Senior Advisor on Iraq to the Secretary of State, addressed concerns about the increase in sectarian violence and the rise of armed militias. "It is increasingly clear that Al Qaeda's strategy to undermine the Iraqi government by sowing sectarian conflict has created a dangerous cycle of violence," he said.

Emphasizing that in order for the violence to end, progress must be made along the security, political, and economic tracks, Ambassador Satterfield continued, "While all must move forward together, a failure or setback in any one area hinders progress in the others. Thus, militias cannot be effectively demobilized in the absence of a larger political reconciliation agreement. Political reconciliation cannot survive if the government cannot agree on the distribution of oil revenue and create jobs. And Iraqis cannot modernize their economy and draw foreign investment if there is sectarian violence in the streets."

General Abizaid also addressed the level of sectarian violence and Al Qaeda influence in Iraq by countering with recent polls that show a marked decrease in how Iraqi citizens view Al Qaeda. "Al Qaeda has largely discredited itself because of its tactics," he said. Regarding the sectarian violence, Abizaid added, "The sectarian nature of the conflict in Iraq requires Iraqi units that have the full support of the national government." He continued, "Increased military activity under greater Iraqi national control will only work however if [Prime Minister Maliki's] government embraces meaningful national reconciliation." Currently around 80% of the sectarian violence in Iraq happens within a 35-mile radius of Baghdad.

Members of the committee also questioned the witnesses on progress being made in other sectors, including the banking and energy sectors. Ambassador Satterfield suggested that the current banking system remains rudimentary but signaled progress in the oil industry has occurred as Iraqi's have taken a major step against corruption. He also addressed the criminal diversion of both refined and crude petroleum products.

Both witnesses stressed that Iraqis do not want to see their country torn apart. According to Ambassador Satterfield, "Most Iraqis want a normal life – not separation." Later, he added that due to the intermingling of ethnic and religious populations throughout Iraq, any partitioning of Iraq would result in bloodshed.

General Abizaid underscored his belief that if we maintain flexibility in managing our force and helping to manage the Iraqi forces, we can continue to build Iraqi capabilities and ultimately remove our major combat forces. Continued flexibility, he believes, without specific timetables will help to ensure a successful mission. "Our commanders and diplomats believe it is possible to achieve an end state in Iraq that finds Iraq at peace with its neighbors, an ally in the war against extremists, respectful of the lives and rights of its citizens, and with security forces sufficient to maintain order, prevent terrorist safe havens, and defend the independence of Iraq," he said. "I remain optimistic that we can stabilize Iraq."

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